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ABSTRACT

Three research projects were completed and a fourth undertaken at Temple University to assess students' and faculty members' perceptions about the communication competency students should have upon entering college. Results suggest that faculty expectancies for students' communication competency can be defined, that student perception of such competencies needed for classroom success are not necessarily the same as faculty perceptions, and that any design for remediation must include the shaping of students' perspectives to meet faculty expectations. Faculty at Temple University are developing specialized remedial courses designed to test and apply these findings. Results of five terms of experience with the program have been positive. Although a final report is not yet available, researchers believe that their program will be successful. (DF)

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REMEDIAL COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTION: WHAT AND WHAT FOR?

by

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A paper presented at the Eleventh International Conference on Improving University Teaching, Utrecht, Holland, July 3, 1985

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REMEDIAL COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTION: WHAT AND WHAT FOR?

Donald H. Ecroyd and Caroline Drummond
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Three research projects completed and one underway at Temple University suggest that faculty expectancies for students' communication competency can be defined, that student perception of such competencies needed for classroom success are not necessarily the same as faculty perceptions, and that any sensible pedagogical design for remediation must include the shaping of students' perspectives to meet faculty expectations. Further implications of the research indicate that expectancies of faculty for the communication competency of their students will not be met by remedial programs that focus on correctness and mechanics; that such instruction must be task oriented; and that the concept of appropriateness, a key criterion in the judgment of competency, must be a criterion in remedial instruction as well. Students in need of remediation must learn to meet the specific communication competencies expected in the classroom culture. Often they do not know what is expected, and even when the related skills are in place, such students must learn how to decontextualize or elaborate their communication behaviors to succeed with classroom tasks.

Faculty at Temple University are developing specialized remedial courses designed to test and apply these findings. All such instruction uses a mastery model, with a format based on the work of James Moffett, and includes as an essential feature the integration of the communication skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Results of five terms of experience with the program have been positive. A final report is not yet in order, but we think we are on the right track.

communication tasks effectively. However, given remedial training, individual instruction, reduced course loads, and extra time to complete the required number of academic courses, many students originally placed in remedial courses master enough competency in the desired skills to succeed in graduating from the university. Francis J. Sullivan, Director of Research for Temple University's Writing Program, suggests that the students placed in remedial instruction are "unfamiliar with academic uses of language, [and] use language in ways that are negatively valued in the academic community."[4] They have not developed the specific level of communication competency that the professor expects in the classroom. They have to be taught how to do what is called for.

It is the purpose of this paper to synthesize the results of a series of research projects, three already completed and one underway, to demonstrate that

1. Faculty expectancies for the communication competency of their students can be defined.
2. Student perceptions of the communication competencies needed for classroom success are not necessarily the same as faculty perceptions.
3. One aspect of any sensible pedagogical design or strategy for remediation must be the shaping of student perspectives to meet the expectations of faculty.

During the spring term of 1977 and during the 1977-78 academic year, two research projects were carried out at Temple University.[5] One study used trained participant observers to develop data concerning identifiable instances in which teachers asked students to use a definable communication skill in a way that might affect grades, yet did not attempt to teach that required skill. The second study used a three-phase questionnaire designed to determine what faculty members would consciously identify as the critical communication skills students should possess in order to function adequately in their classrooms.

The field study identified 45 speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills; by coincidence, 45 specific skills (not the same) were also identified by the faculty members completing all three phases of the questionnaire study. Content analysis of the two lists reduced them to a single list of forty items. From these forty items, the following four broad areas were defined:

1. Skills related to comprehending and being able to respond to instructions.

   The student should be able to

   A. Follow written or oral instructions accurately.

   B. Read and comprehend textbook materials, exam questions, written problems, class assignment handouts; read with concentration.

   C. Read teacher's corrections, and demonstrate responsibility for applying them with an eye to improvement.

2. Skills related to notetaking, whether from spoken or written material.

   The student should be able to

   A. Relate lecture information or information in reading material to other knowledge; remember earlier definitions, instructions, concepts; remember what was read or studied in some detail; note inconsistencies, contradictions, omissions--of logic or fact--whether within a lecture, between lectures, or between the lecture content and the readings.

   B. Recognize what is not understood in lectures or in readings and ask questions for clarification; know when to reread, study, or review; know how to use a dictionary, indices, glossaries, bibliographies, footnotes, appendices, etc.; use basic library reference sources.

C. Distinguish between key ideas and details; follow the flow of logic that is used to establish an abstract point; read or listen critically, distinguishing opinion from fact, main ideas from secondary ones and from illustrative material; distinguish conflicting sides of an argument; determine the bias or point of view of an author or lecturer, be prepared to dissent from presented opinion for good reason.

D. Take accurate, concise, useful notes on both oral and written material; paraphrase, synopsize, abstract, summarize.

3. Skills related to classroom discussion, and to the asking and answering of questions--both orally and in writing.

The student should be able to

A. Answer oral questions in class, or answer study questions or exam questions in writing, in ways that are precise, specific, pertinent, complete.

B. Ask and answer questions based upon course content, lectures, or readings, in a clear, understandable form.

C. Keep to the point in discussion; listen to other students and relate to them in discussion; express critical evaluations of others' ideas; summarize key ideas in a discussion; raise key issues and pertinent questions designed to move things along.

D. Speak at a rate and loudness level that permits easy classroom understandability.

4. Skills related to the presentation of oral and written reports.

The student should be able to

A. Formulate a thesis when reporting, whether orally or in writing; use a logical progression of thought (beginning, middle, end).

B. Prove, demonstrate, or otherwise establish that thesis on the basis of evidence and reasoning; demonstrate library research skills; use evidence, illustrations, examples, quotations, statistics appropriately.

C. Define key terms or concepts, write or speak coherently.

D. Use an adequate, effective vocabulary; write or speak simply, concisely, clearly.

E. Write grammatically; spell correctly.

The presumption of this research is that deficiencies in these areas could be expected to inhibit or even negate the possibility of classroom success. Students who enter the university at skills levels seriously below those predicted for them by their instructors will by definition have difficulty performing expected classroom communication tasks with anything more than marginal success. These students must catch up in the development of these abilities, or a large percentage of them will fail. If they are to catch up, they must progress at a faster than normal rate with respect to learning the things that are expected of them by their teachers but which they do not already know. Since these skills are expectancies, they are not for the most part addressed in the regular classroom instructional program. Therefore it is not reasonable to expect regular classroom programs to produce such learning--especially at a faster than normal rate. Remedial programs are therefore essential for some students.

The implications of the field study research, however, add three important dimensions to these conclusions. First, the classroom communication competency expectations of college professors are not going to be met by remedial coursework that focuses on correctness. Far more important are such general considerations as fluency and structure. Second, remedial instruction designed to meet the classroom communication competency expectations of college professors

must be task oriented. The professors observed were not asking students for writing about personal experiences but for spe ific technical writing, research skills, and study skills. Fina'ly, the concept of appropriateness--a key criterion in the judgment of competency--must be a criterion in remedial instruction also. Nontraditional students not only need to be trained to implement their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills; they also need to learn more clearly the norms and rules that apply to the classroom task. Merely working with standard grammar, pronunciation, syntax, and the mechanics of organizational structure does not teach the students to know how to use language appropriately in the classroom. Traditional methods of remedial instruction are simply not appropriate nor productive.

Sullivan's data as well as those from our own field study seem to emphasize the transactional nature of classroom communication. So long as actual criteria for effectiveness are unstated or unknown, the only ones who can succeed are the traditionally oriented students who have been acculturated to the norms and rules. Even when such criteria are stated, nontraditional students need careful training if those criteria are to be internalized and applied effectively.

In order to assess whether or not there was indeed a difference between faculty and student perceptions of communication competencies needed for successful classroom performance, additional research was undertaken in the spring of 1982.[6] Dr. Charles V. Roberts, then at Central College (Iowa), took our list of forty items and asked faculty membe.'s teaching courses identified as communication emphasis courses: Do you expect this of your students? Do you teach this skill? Do you consider it irrelevant? He then took the same list and asked students in these courses, item by item, whether or not a given skill was expected in a given class, whether or not the professor did indeed work with them on that skill in class, or whether or not the item seemed irrelevant.

Comparisons between the faculty and student lists revealed significant differences in expectations.[7]

So, even if we identify faculty expectancies and try to teach for them in remedial classes, and even if we somehow persuade faculty across the curriculum to teach communication skills rather than merely expect them we still have not solved the problem of students' lack of awareness of faculty expectations. A classroom is a culture, and cultural norms must be known and followed if one is to "belong." Certain behaviors are perceived by the professor as operative classroom norms, but his or her students may not perceive these same norms as relevant. When there is agreement, the student does well and the professor feels that the student has been appropriately placed. When there is disagreement, however, even though the student may put in hours of hard work, there is little payoff in grades. Such a student is viewed as incompetent or marginal. Traditional students tend to be communicatively competent within the demands of the classroom culture almost by definition, while the communication competence of nontraditional students is not useful in satisfying the professor's expectancies. Such students do not know how to use language appropriately in this particular variety of experience--the classroom. They need to be taught to recognize what is expected, what the criteria of excellence actually are, and when and how skills relevant to those criteria should be applied. The point, as argued forcefully years ago by James Moffett, is to make overt the covert aspects of task mastery.[8]

To be admitted to Temple University, students must have placed in the upper 50% of their high school graduating classes. Nevertheless, some 47% of each year's entering students test into remedial courses in reading and writing. In our particular phase of the program, we take the 125 students each year who score lowest on the university's English Placement Examination and in the free

writing sample evaluation. For these students we have devised a specialized remedial course designed to test our ideas that

1. Remedial communication skills should be taught in such a way as to improve the classroom effectiveness of the student.
2. Faculty expectancies must be translated into teaching/learning modules and these must then be taught for an acceptable level of student mastery.
3. Students must learn not only the needed implementing skills but must also learn to recognize when these skills are called for.[9]

Students continue in the course until their general competency in the prescribed tasks is sufficient to make it sensible for them to move into a remedial writing course stressing composition skills and mechanics, no matter how many semesters are required. And students receive no university credit for any of these remedial courses.

The basic tasks which are the focus of the coursework are those derived from our 1977-78 studies (see pages 3-5 above). All instruction and teaching strategies are carefully oriented to classroom tasks because students must learn more than just skills. The instructional methodology is based on Moffett's approach, using a format that includes two essential features:

1. The integration of communication skills: reading in order to talk, listening in order to write, writing in order to read aloud, talking in order to write, etc.
2. The fading out of cues in order to make the covert become overt to the learner: for example, listen to a recorded lecture and follow an outline; listen to a recorded lecture and fill in an incomplete outline; listen to a recorded lecture and outline its main ideas.

We now have five terms of experience with our basic instructional model. Our student pass-out rate at the end of one semester of instruction has increased from 52.7% in 1970-71 to 62% in 1982-84. A final report is not yet in order, but we think we are on the right track. Students in need of remediation with regard to communication skills need to be taught to meet the specific communication competencies expected in the classroom culture. Generally they do not know these expectancies, and even when the related skills are in place, such students often do not know how to decontextualize or elaborate their communication sufficiently to succeed with classroom tasks. We are working with apparent success to demystify that process.

NOTES

[1]Barbara S. Wood and others, Developing Communicative Competence in Children: Grades 7-12 (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association and ERIC Clearinghouse in Reading and the Communication Skills, 1977). This definition reflects the work reported by Kevin Connolly and Jerome Bruner in The Growth of Competence (New York: Academic Press, 1974). It is also in line with the concerns of James C. McCroskey, in "Communication Competence and Performance: A Research and Pedagogical Perspective," Communication Education, 31:1 (January 1982), 1-8; McCroskey holds that communication competence and communication performance skills do not necessarily predict each other.

[2]Donald H. Ecroyd, "Teaching for Communication Competence," in Teaching for Literacy, ed. Frances Davis and Robert Parker (New York: Agathon Press, 1978).

[3]Ralph E. Jenkins, "Remedial Language Programs as Systems," Fifth International Conference in Culture and Communication, Philadelphia, PA, March 1983.

[4]Francis J. Sullivan, "Remedial Writers: Cognition vs. Culture," Fifth International Conference on Culture and Communication, Philadelphia, PA, March

1983. See also Ralph Jenkins, Leo Rigsby, and Francis J. Sullivan, "How Does ELECT Affect Students' Progress toward Graduation?" ELECT Research Report #1, available from Ralph Jenkins, Director, ELECT Program, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

[5]Donald H. Ecroyd and Judith Goldhammer, "A Survey of Faculty Expectations for Communication Competence in College Students," Third International Conference in Communication and Culture, Philadelphia, PA, March 1979; Donald H. Ecroyd and Judith Goldhammer, "A Field Study of Communication Competency Expectations of Certain College Faculty Members for Their Students," International Communication Association Convention, Minneapolis, MN, May 1981.

[6]Reported briefly in Charles V. Roberts and Donald H. Ecroyd, "Establishing an Institution-wide Program for Teaching Communication Area Courses," Speech Communication Association Convention, Louisville, KY, November 1982. For a full report on Central College's experience with the Communication Across the Curriculum program, see Charles V. Roberts, "Speaking and Listening Education across the Curriculum," in Improving Speaking and Listening, ed. Rebecca B. Rubin (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983).

[7]The full report of the questionnaire results is available from Dr. Roberts, Professor and Chairman, Department of Speech, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, LA 70609.

[8]James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968).

[9]The present curriculum is based on a design prepared by Professor Adele Gerber of the Temple University Department of Speech, which has been adapted under her direction. Copies of the current version are available from Donald H. Ecroyd, ELECT-Speech Coordinator, Department of Speech, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122.